Green college

Rather typically of Corpus, over the past year there has been a lot of quiet but determined activity to respond to the Climate Emergency and put Corpus on a less carbon intensive path in future years.

The seriousness of the changes to our climate and ecosystems and the exponential acceleration of impacts has been a call to arms for the College. Most importantly, this has been a collaborative enterprise where Junior Members, Fellows and staff have all had a role to play. In particular, Junior Members have made a critical contribution and injected a sense of rational urgency into proceedings. The College thanks all of those involved for this.

So, what have we been doing? The first phase of this project was to examine the Endowment, upon which the College relies so heavily so that we can get immediate results. It was remarkable that in the end the case for divestment from carbon intensive industries, reduces carbon emissions by 40% and doubles ‘green revenues’. We hope that this fund will gradually reduce our carbon footprint and focus our minds on our listed buildings but allow casual waste streams to be properly segregated at source. We will now be able to create a baseline for waste and set targets for its reduction. Most importantly, our new contractors send zero waste to landfill.

We have also decided to investigate building the new Special Collections Centre to Passivhaus standards. Passivhaus is the gold standard for sustainability and is significantly more rigorous than current government standards. While the University also has Passivhaus aspirations, in fact at this point no significant building in Oxford and certainly not one connected to a 16th century Grade I listed structure has achieved Passivhaus standards, so this would be truly ground breaking if we are able to do it. The additional cost is estimated at £500,000, or 5% of the build cost, but we believe the savings over the life of the building, occasioned by the minimal requirement for active heating or cooling will at least partially offset the initial outlay (see chart below). We expect this building to achieve a 53% reduction in CO₂ emissions compared to current best practice construction which is, I think, a remarkable statistic. We also expect the building to benefit from much tighter building controls throughout its construction; this will lead to fewer problems in the future, as buildings often suffer from mistakes made during construction which only come to light years afterwards. Passivhaus requires ongoing inspection and certification throughout construction which will, we hope, mean that we get this right first time with consequent longer term cost-benefits.

Finally, we have committed to engage with the farmers and contractors on our lands to promote greater biodiversity and low-input farming. While it will take some time to shift the portfolio fully in this direction, these goals are expansive and go beyond the box ticking and ‘greenwashing’ so often seen in the corporate and investment world.

The second phase has been to look at the College site, our wider estates and our passive investment fund. Amundi SA, to devise a strategy which achieves full divestment from carbon intensive industries, reduces carbon emissions by 40% and doubles ‘green revenues’. We hope that this fund will be up and running in 2020 and that it will become a core pillar for our Endowment. We have prohibited investment in munitions and other industries that do not align with our charitable purpose and mission: pornography, tobacco and the extraction of thermal coal or tar sands.

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The President set up a Sustainability Working Group in Michaelmas 2019, which consisted of Fellows, the Domestic Bursar, the Bursar and representatives from the MCR and the JCR. Lots of ideas were suggested with an emphasis on taking targeted action in areas where it was possible to make an immediate impact. For example, the team recommended that we achieve Passivhaus standards in all future buildings and that we divert food to local charities. We also established a Sustainability Working Group in Michaelmas 2019, with the aim of bringing together all of these ideas and setting a clear plan for action.

In conclusion, it is very much the beginning of our sustainability journey. What has been gratifying has been the shared sense of commitment and purpose across all the College constituencies. Sustaining and enhancing our Endowment sustainability has often been divisive elsewhere but in our case it has been a process where all have felt able to contribute views and to feel that they have had a role in shaping College policy. The result has been a series of important and meaningful decisions which will reduce the College’s impact on the environment in future years and permit us to achieve our charitable purpose in a much more sustainable manner.

Nicholas Melhuish, Estates Bursar

Heating Demand

The stage 3 Passivhaus design achieves a 65% reduction in annual heating energy use compared to the best practice design. Our new waste contractors send 0 waste to landfill.